American Involvement in Cripps Mission

By DINYAR PATEL

In early 1942, the bombs began falling on the eastern coast of India. With Japanese forces massing on the Burmese border after rolling through Southeast Asia, the subcontinent seemed to be on the eve of a massive invasion. Despite this threat, India stood woefully unprepared for war.

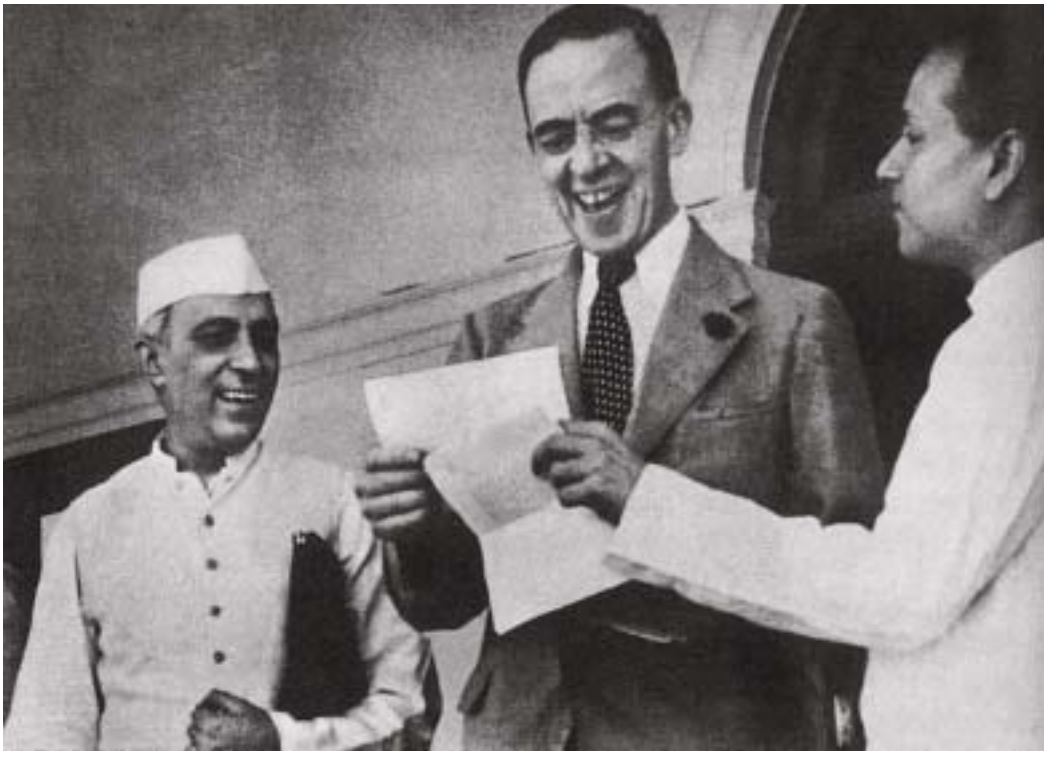
"What of America, that great land of democracy, to which imperialist England looks for support and sustenance during this war? Does Britain think that the people of the United States will pour their gold and commodities to make the world safe for British imperialism?…The aims and objectives of this terrible war are clear at last."

—JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

From the Himalayas to Cape Comorin there were virtually no anti-aircraft guns, air-raid floodlights, or radar sets. For Calcutta, in grave danger of attack by waves of Japanese bombers, the only defenses that the Royal Air Force could muster were two barely workable fighter planes. Damaging the already fragile Indian morale, British authorities in New Delhi hastily devised a scorched earth policy to at least slow down a Japanese advance. Surplus rice and grain was moved out of the northeast, and plans were drawn up to destroy Assam's Digboi oilfields and Calcutta's port. British authorities appeared resigned to defeat, yet made no attempts to engage the Indian independence movement, so to at least buoy Indian spirit. Lord Linlithgow, the dour Scot who ruled from the Viceroy's House, vowed he would never "gratuitously hurry the handing over of controls to Indian hands," even as British possessions in East Asia were falling into Japanese hands. India's situation seemed hopeless.

Yet it was in this same dark hour, as gloom and defeatism threatened to descend over the subcontinent, that India and America forged their first meaningful relations. The two countries recognized their shared values, principles and idealism. India sincerely hoped these commonalties would help it win independence, and America believed that they would help the Allies win the war. Looking at America, Jawaharlal Nehru and other Indian leaders saw a vibrant democracy that was firmly opposed to empire. Looking at India, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and members of his administration were reminded of their own nation's struggle against colonialism and for representative government. The realities of war forced America and India to act on these observations and build an alliance rooted in both practicality and principle. As today's diplomats are busy shuffling between New Delhi and Washington, proclaiming a new relationship between India and the United States, it is important to reflect on the first instance when the two nations recognized themselves as "natural allies."

The year 1942 began badly for the Allies. Great Britain had survived the traumas of the Blitz but now heavily relied on American aid in order to stay alive. Following the fall of Hong Kong on Christmas Day 1941, Britain's Asian holdings began to crumble one by one: first Malaya, then Singapore, and finally Burma. To many policymakers, Japan and Germany seemed engaged in a "giant pincer movement" designed to unite their two empires. At the center of this movement was India. If Germany was to continue advancing through the Soviet Union and Japan was to capture India, American journalist Kate Mitchell warned, the Axis



Jawaharlal Nehru with Sir Stafford Cripps at Birla House, New Delhi, March 1942.

powers would "have control of a wide belt stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, so rich in basic raw materials, food, labor power, and strategic military and naval bases that [the Allied position] would be highly critical, to say the least."

Thus, American attention focused on India. Instead of finding a country ready to defend its borders, officials in Washington were shocked to discover abysmally low morale. What incentive did Indians have to fight off the Japanese empire when the British Empire refused to retreat? For Viceroy Linlithgow, wartime hostilities had provided New Delhi a convenient excuse for stymieing the Indian independence movement. He had shocked the Indian National Congress in 1939 by declaring, without consulting any one of the country's 300 million inhabitants, India at war with Germany. Now Winston Churchill, famous for declaring that he would "rather go out in the wilderness and fight" than lose India, was Prime Minister. For many Indians, World War II seemed to be a conflict between their present occupier and a potential new invader.

In early 1942, President Roosevelt received an urgent telegram from Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of Nationalist China. Chiang and his wife had just returned from a goodwill visit to India. "I am personally shocked," the Chinese leader began, "by the Indian military and political situation. In a word, the danger is extreme. If the British government does not fundamentally change their policy toward India, it would be like presenting India to the enemy and inviting them to quickly occupy India." The telegram confirmed Roosevelt's fear that British colonial mismanagement posed a threat to the Allied war effort.

Indian leaders had long been aware of Roosevelt's concern and knew they could use it to their advantage. On January 2, 1942, the moderate Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru sent a message to Winston Churchill, asking in telegraphese for a "bold stroke far-sighted statesmanship…without delay." To Sapru, a bold stroke meant the creation of a provisional national government that would effectively make India a Commonwealth dominion like Canada or Australia. Such a symbolic move, he believed, would rally Indian morale by providing visible proof of autonomy. The genius of Sapru's telegram lay in its timing. His telegram was addressed to Washington, not London, for on January 2, Churchill was in America discussing war plans with Roosevelt. Within a short while, Roosevelt learned of the cable and began pressing Churchill on the issue of Indian independence.

Tej Bahadur Sapru

By February it wasn't just Roosevelt who was getting concerned about the situation in India. On the 25th of that month, Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long reported "a serious undercurrent of anti-British feeling" at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee meeting. Long went on to summarize the proceedings:

> "We should demand that India be given a status of autonomy. The only way to get the people of India to fight was to get them to fight for India…which could only be obtained by accepting the thesis of Gandhi's political objective."

Senators had insisted Britain take action on India. The question remained, however, what type of action to take. Roosevelt thought he had an answer. On March 10, the President sent a lengthy telegram to the British Prime Minister, in which he drew from America's first experiences as an independent nation. "Perhaps the analogy of some such method to the travails and problems of the United States from 1783 to 1789," he wrote to Churchill, "might give a new slant in India itself." India, Roosevelt believed, needed the Articles of Confederation—the document that held the United States together before the Constitution

was written. Churchill was less convinced. The Americans, he grumbled, "had strong opinions and little experience."

Churchill knew, however, that he could not ignore those strong opinions. At this crucial hour of the war, the United States was becoming wary of supporting Great Britain since it was unwilling to abandon its imperial outlook. Moreover, Parliament and the British public in general were pressuring the Prime Minister to make some sort of overture to India. On March 11, Churchill finally relented. He rose in the House of Commons and announced that Sir Stafford Cripps, a left-leaning member of Parliament who enjoyed huge popularity in both Great Britain and India, would go to New Delhi and present a formula for Indian independence after the war. Thus, the "Cripps Mission" was born. Washington's pressure seemed to have paid off.

Cripps' task was not easy. The formula Churchill had given him was convoluted and controversial, and India was desperate for a clear declaration of independence. When Cripps stepped off the plane in New Delhi on March 22 he realized just how dire the situation had become. Nehru greeted him with words of gloom: "Lack of food, unemployment, bad transport—everything tends to a popular upheaval. Martial law would fail because there are not enough troops to enforce it. We shan't be able to hold India." Viceroy Linlithgow had been of little encouragement to Nehru and other Indian leaders, having declared recently that India and Burma would stay in the Empire "because they are conquered countries." After meeting with Cripps, several Indian National Congress leaders came to the opinion that the Cripps formula was bad for India.

When a dismayed Mohandas K. Gandhi read the British government's proposals and advised Cripps to take the next plane home, he responded that he "would consider that."

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On April 3, as the Cripps Mission teetered on the brink of failure, there was an unusual twist in the story. Colonel Louis A. Johnson, a middle-aged West Virginian, arrived in New Delhi with a rather weighty title: Personal Representative of the President of the United States in India. Johnson was officially in India to oversee American-funded wartime production, but as Cripps knew, "it was clear …that he had been sent post-haste…in order to lend a hand in achieving an Indian settlement." Roosevelt had sensed the herculean task Cripps faced in India, and was now taking a personal stake in the Mission's success. Johnson immediately became involved in the issue causing the greatest deadlock: the appointment of an Indian defense minister. Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad and others firmly believed that the only way to get Indians to fight against the Japanese was to give them an Indian leader coordinating the war effort. Colonial leaders in London and New Delhi balked at the idea.

Johnson injected new energy into the negotiations: in the span of a few days he held 19 talks with Cripps and 16 with Nehru. With careful discussion, Indian leaders and Cripps began reaching a consensus on the defense minister issue. In regular telegrams back to Washington, the colonel informed Roosevelt about the Cripps Mission's growing chances of success. Cripps had been encouraged, too. On April 8 he cabled Churchill:

> "Largely owing to the very efficient and wholehearted help of Col. Johnson, President Roosevelt's personal representative, I have hopes [the] scheme may now succeed. I should like you to thank the President for Col. Johnson's help on behalf of H.M.G. (His Majesty's Government) and also personally on my own behalf."

But Cripps' improving chances were worrying the Prime Minister and Linlithgow. Churchill had hoped that the fine print of the Cripps formula would deter Congress' approval, and that the Mission would serve largely as a public relations stunt to appease American opinion. Now it was dangerously close to succeeding. Replying to Cripps' buoyant message, Churchill wrote on April 9, "It is essential to bring the whole matter back to the Cabinet's [original] plan, which you went out to urge." The Prime Minister had effectively revoked Cripps' power to negotiate on the formula for postwar independence; Churchill's message was that Congress could either "take it or leave it." The Cripps Mission was dead.

Johnson was now powerless to influence discussion of an Indian defense minister, since such a position was not in the original formula drafted in London. Rejection of the Cripps proposals arrived swiftly from Congress' Birla House. Churchill followed up with hollow words of encouragement for Cripps, claiming that "the effect [of the Mission] throughout Britain and in the United States has been wholly beneficial." In that latter claim he would prove to be terribly wrong. Roosevelt was shocked to learn of the Mission's failure and urged Churchill to keep Cripps in India. "Every effort must be made to prevent a breakdown," he hastily wrote to London on April 12. "I regret to say that I am unable to agree…that public opinion in the United States believes that negotiations have broken down on general broad issues….The feeling is held almost universally that the deadlock has been due to the British government's unwillingness to concede the right of self-government to the Indians." Despite the President's entreaties, the Prime Minister wrote back that Cripps' plane had already left New Delhi.

The Mission's failure, while recognized on all sides as a

President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in Casablanca in January 1943 at one of their wartime meetings.

tragedy, actually brought India and the United States closer together. Officials in Washington—from diplomats in the State Department to Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter—grew deeply suspicious of Great Britain and its motives in India. When a British government official visited the U.S. capital in April 1942, Roosevelt interrogated him about whether Churchill had cabled new instructions to Cripps just as the Mission was on the verge of succeeding. In New Delhi, Johnson had become so disillusioned with the British that he urged "a replotting of our policy" in India. "Association with the British here," he warned, "is bound to adversely affect the morale of our own officers."

Now the United States turned toward Indian leaders. The cause for Indian independence had left a deep impression on Johnson, who was struck by its commitment to democratic, egalitarian principles. Even Congress' official rejection of the Cripps formula, according to him, was "a masterpiece and will appeal to free men everywhere." Johnson had also developed tremendous respect for Nehru. "Nehru has been magnificent," he cabled back to Washington. "The President would like him and on most things they agree…he is our hope here." Roosevelt himself was moved by a letter Nehru wrote after Cripps' departure. Promising the President that Indians would fight against any Japanese invading force, Nehru stated that Indians would "prefer to perish rather than submit to a new invader."

Support for India was not limited to the uppermost circles of government. The Indian independence movement was enjoying a surge of popularity and interest among Americans. The India League of America organized a mass rally in New York, calling on Roosevelt and Chiang Kai-shek to restart negotiations between Churchill's government and the Congress. Pro-India sentiment only increased after the August 1942 "Quit India" movement landed the Congress leadership in jail. Days after the arrests, a Gallup poll found that 43 percent of Americans supported Indian independence; only 17.2 percent opposed it. The large and influential United Auto Workers, a labor union, passed a resolution supporting *swaraj*. The media also came out against British imperialism. In its August 24 edition, *Time* put Nehru on its front cover and carried an article on his struggles for Indian self-rule. Two months later, the editors of *Life* published "An Open Letter" to the British public. Claiming that they spoke for the majority opinion in America, they warned that "if you cling to Empire...you will lose the war. Because you will lose us."

Unfortunately, the pressures of war prohibited India and the United States from further deepening their relations. With its soldiers "island hopping" their way westward, America's attention increasingly shifted to battles in the Pacific Ocean. Languishing behind bars, Nehru and other Indian leaders were unable to continue their dialogue with Washington. Ultimately, the Japanese never launched an invasion of India, and thus the subcontinent's strategic importance waned. But the events of 1942 were to have lasting implications for both countries. American pressure had contributed to Cripps' visit to New Delhi, and while the Mission had failed, it had opened discussion on a postwar India free from the yoke of imperialism. Great Britain realized that the emerging American superpower would not tolerate the Empire after the war ended. For the United States, India played an equally crucial role by widening American foreign policy horizons. India, in American minds, had been an exotic, faraway land of maharajas and ascetics. Now Americans saw the real India, one that was hoping to become a democratic, modern state in the community of nations. "India, perhaps more than any other factor in recent years," the journalist Kate Mitchell asserted in May 1942, "has once and for all destroyed whatever isolationist illusions the United States may have harbored." □

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